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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
2 February 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Enemy Threat to Khe Sanh

Summary

Enemy preparations for the long expected offensive at Khe Sanh appear at an advanced stage, and a major attack could be launched at any time.

Two full Communist divisions--comprising at least six infantry regiments with artillery support--are emplaced within striking distance of the outpost. In addition, at least two infantry regiments of the North Vietnamese 320th Division have been deployed to an area in the north-central DMZ from where they could move to interdict and harass allied reinforcements moving from the east toward Khe Sanh.

During the last two weeks enemy forces near Khe Sanh have continued to build up their supply caches and strengthen their fortified positions in the area. They have also bolstered their antiaircraft (AAA) defenses in the area, adding a number of heavy machine guns and possibly 37-mm. and 57-mm. AAA.

Having launched their major offensive against the urban areas in South Vietnam, the Communists probably now view the Khe Sanh front as a major new pressure point with which to help overextend and weaken the allied military position in South Vietnam.

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Note: This memorandum, an update of [] of the same title issued on 10 January, was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared jointly by the Office of Current Intelligence and the Vietnamese Affairs Staff.

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The Build-up

1. Developments in recent weeks strongly suggest that the Vietnamese Communists intend once again to increase military pressure against the strategically placed outpost at Khe Sanh, on Route 9 in Quang Tri Province.

2. The post, approximately nine miles from the Laotian border, is used as a base for observation and interdiction of enemy infiltration activities in the area. It was last besieged in the winter of 1967, following the movement of the North Vietnamese 325C Division into the western DMZ area. This division has again moved into the region, after a period of rest and refitting in North Vietnam.

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The Current Situation

4. Since the outbreak of major enemy activity on 30 January, the military situation in the Demilitarized Zone/western Quang Tri Province area--the anticipated focal point of a Communist offensive--has remained unusually quiet.

5. The Communists' timetable for major attacks in this sector, presumably in concert with the widespread attacks elsewhere, is believed to have been delayed in part at least by the unusually heavy allied aerial bombardment against North Vietnamese positions threatening Khe Sanh and the network of allied strong points just below the zone. The Communists may also be waiting for the most advantageous weather conditions.

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9. Meanwhile, regimental strength elements of the North Vietnamese 325 "C" and 304th Divisions have continued to maneuver into battle positions to the north, west, and south of Khe Sanh. Sharply intensified aerial photoreconnaissance of the Khe Sanh area has provided tentative indications of a major attempt by the North Vietnamese to dig their way toward the strategic US combat base--an "encroachment with fortifications" reminiscent of the Dien Bien Phu tactics. Photography indicates that the Communists have been preparing positions ever closer to the Marine garrison but not occupying them. Should the North Vietnamese begin to construct communications trenches leading forward from these positions, the parallel to Dien Bien Phu would become even stronger.

10. Moreover, US aircraft during late January reported the presence of 37-mm. and/or 57-mm. enemy antiaircraft artillery weapons in the hills north and west of Khe Sanh. In addition, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] some 20 field artillery pieces were being towed by vehicles through Laos to firing positions near Khe Sanh. The introduction of these weapons would significantly enhance the enemy's firepower capability against both the Khe Sanh garrison and allied aerial resupply and reinforcement efforts in the area.

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11. To the east of Khe Sanh, regimental-size elements of the North Vietnamese 320th Division, supported by reconnaissance and artillery/rocket units, have concentrated near Camp Carroll and the Rockpile. Two additional North Vietnamese regiments--

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[REDACTED]

Enemy Objectives

12. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the build-up around Khe Sanh is that the enemy may hope to wipe out the US garrison there and the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camp at Lang Vei, about five miles to the southwest on Route 9. The Communists have long regarded Khe Sanh, located near the infiltration corridors in Laos, as a thorn in their side. According to the latest available information, the garrison at Khe Sanh is defended by four infantry battalions, and an artillery battalion of the 26th Marine Regiment. In addition, an ARVN ranger battalion is deployed along the garrison's outer defense perimeter. The CIDG camp at Lang Vei has about 320 men.

13. The Communists, however, do not need a force of upwards of 20,000 men to overrun Khe Sanh and Lang Vei. If the build-up is as extensive as suspected, and all of these units are destined to be committed to an offensive in the area, the primary purpose of the Communists may prove to be much broader. By attacking Khe Sanh, they would hope to draw US reinforcements into the area, tie them down to static defensive positions, and inflict maximum casualties on US forces over a protracted time period. By occupying the high ground around Khe Sanh and setting up ambushes along Route 9, the only overland route into the area, the enemy could make resupply and reinforcement a difficult and costly proposition, especially if he has developed an effective antiaircraft capability. Monsoon rains have closed large portions of Route 9, compounding the problem and making resupply largely dependent on airlift.

14. Allied reinforcement difficulties would be increased if the enemy managed to sustain his current offensive around and in the urban areas of the country. Reaction to this thrust has so far tied down numerous allied maneuver battalions and reserve forces.

15. A final objective of the Khe Sanh build-up would be to harass and foil the strong-point barrier system which is being implemented in the DMZ north of Khe Sanh and in the infiltration corridors of Laos.

16. Enemy strategy as outlined above fits in with the enemy's efforts during 1967 in fighting the main force war partly from peripheral areas adjacent to border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. By positioning his forces in these areas, the enemy sought to lure US units away from populated areas, disperse them, and inflict a maximum number of casualties in the process. This relieves pressure on main force units operating in populated areas and enables them to coordinate with local force units to disrupt the pacification program and attack allied outposts and base camps around urban areas. Since the start of the "winter-spring campaign" in October, the enemy has employed this strategy in II Corps and III Corps.

17. The next few days are expected to bring poor flying weather to the Khe Sanh/DMZ area, thereby seriously restricting allied tactical air support and resupply efforts. Moreover, sizable numbers of allied forces who otherwise would be available as reinforcement to positions under siege in northern and western Quang Tri Province have been diverted to clearing and securing the many areas recently attacked from Quang Tri city southward to Hue. These factors weigh heavily in favor of possibly imminent offensive activity at Khe Sanh, probably in coordination with major thrusts against allied positions along the central and eastern portions of the DMZ.

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